

DCI inmates help care for animals

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JACKSON -- Dixon Correctional Institute will assist the Humane Society of the United States in caring for some of the thousands of animals rescued from south Louisiana devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

As Hurricane Rita roared through the Gulf of Mexico on Thursday night, the prison accepted about 120 dogs and a few other animals to make room for possible new arrivals at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, DCI Warden James LeBlanc said.

Another shipment of dogs arrived Sunday, running the count on Monday to 160 dogs, five ducks, five geese, 17 hens and three crowing roosters at a former dairy barn east of Jackson and the main prison compound.

The barn sustained some roof damage from Rita's winds Friday night, but inmates assisting with the project moved the animals' cages to avoid the major roof leaks, said DCI's Amanda Smith.

More than 25 inmates volunteered to help care for the animals.

"They enjoy this. I don't know what it is, but many inmates love to work with animals," LeBlanc said.

Smith, who coordinates re-entry programs for inmates who are ending their prison terms, said the work is good therapy for the prisoners.

"I'm from the New Orleans area. I'm fortunate that I didn't lose anything in the storm," said inmate John Loyd, who gave up an outside work crew assignment to care for the animals. "This is my way to help out, my contribution to society. If I wasn't in here, I'd probably be volunteering somewhere."

The pets will be housed at DCI while the Humane Society and other animal welfare groups work to reunite them with their families or place them in "foster homes" until they can be adopted, society President Wayne Pecelle said in a news release.

Smith said the long-range goal is to create a permanent shelter at DCI for regional use in case of a similar disaster.

The Humane Society is paying all expenses associated with running the prison shelter, including the cost of food and medicine.

"We can't use state funds," LeBlanc said.

Nineteen volunteers from Michigan State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital stepped in to help care for the animals, Smith said.

The team, which is staying in Louisiana for two weeks, will be replaced by other volunteers after Saturday, Smith said.

Veterinarian Valerie Chadwick and licensed veterinary technician Cassandra Vong were hard at work Monday morning.

"We are treating all the animals, looking for problems and medicating them properly," Chadwick said as she applied a topical medicine to a dog with suspicious spots on his coat.

"We're looking for ringworm," she said.

Also on hand Monday were volunteers with the Humane Society of Kalamazoo, Mich., which supplied a mobile veterinary clinic.

Meanwhile, Smith said some DCI employees have picked out favorites for possible adoptions if no owner comes forward.

Security Lt. Jason Allen pointed to a German shepherd that caught his eye and those of other DCI canine unit officers.

"It's had some training. It walks with you and stays when you tell it. It might make a good drug dog. Right now, it needs to put on some more weight," he said.

Another 100 dogs may be moved from Lamar-Dixon to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola later this week, Smith said.